

Drama: a tool for inclusion

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Abstract

During a week of school experience for Primary School Teaching in the Special Education school Krossen skole in Kristiansand, Norway, I was able to observe a drama class with not only pupils with Special Needs, but also with mainstream students. In combination of theory, reflections and observations, this article presents the benefits of including performing arts in the syllabus as a tool for diversity awareness, encouraging inclusion and the psycho-social development of each child.

Keywords: Drama, Special Education, Special Needs, inclusion, diversity awareness

Título: Drama: a tool for inclusion.

Resumen

Durante una semana de prácticas para Maestro de Educación Primaria en el colegio de Educación Especial Krossen Skole en Kristiansand, Noruega, pude observar una clase de teatro en la que participaban no solo alumnos con Necesidades Especiales sino también alumnos de la modalidad ordinaria. Combinando teoría, reflexiones y observaciones, este artículo presenta los beneficios de incluir el arte dramático en el currículum como herramienta para la atención a la diversidad, fomentando la inclusión y el desarrollo psico-social de cada niño.

Palabras clave: Teatro, Educación Especial, Necesidades Especiales, inclusión, atención a la diversidad.

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In Krossen Skole they have every Friday drama class, where children from the Special Needs (SEN) and the mainstream departments meet. This year, the play that they will perform at Christmas is about five *Julebukk* that go knocking on different doors, but in each house lives a Norwegian character that interrupts them to sing him/herself.

Since a very young age, children play with objects pretending that are other things, like a branch is a magic wand or a shoe is a phone until eventually they pretend to be a fireman, a cook, or even a parent themselves. This is what we call *Symbolic play*. Regarding this, we find that Vygotsky's notes point out that "from the point of view of development, play is not the predominant form of activity, but is, in a certain sense, the leading source of development in preschool years." (Vygotsky, 1966, p. 6)

Drama classes are in this sense, a formal way of symbolic play, so what benefits does it really have in infants' development?

The process of working through theatre and drama games, attends globally the different dimensions of a child, since with the stage plays we perform we work not only the motor development, but also the cognitive, aesthetic, social-affective and expressive developments. Through theatre the pupils move, dance, learn that there are speech turns to communicate, get accustomed to listen to who is speaking, memorize fragments of texts, make handcrafts to do the scenery and costumes, exert themselves to pronounce properly, to speak in public and to overcome shyness... in addition to work in a cooperative way with their peers and adults. Therefore, it covers several needs of children during this stage. (Sos, Jiménez, Monfort, Peris, Soler, n.d., p. 3)

As Sarah Owen (n.d.) says, drama builds up confidence, helps concentration, helps develop language and communication skills, supports numeracy skills, and develops emotional intelligence and creativity.

Children with Special Needs tend to have a harder time developing some of these skills on top of understanding social interactions.

Drama is the best vehicle for social skills development because drama involves students in concrete, hands-on practice of behavior. Skills are physically and verbally acted out instead of just being talked about, so appropriate behavior becomes very real to the participants. (Bailey, 1997, p. 2)

Before the play is decided each year in Krossen Skole, the class works with theatrical games that help pupils to know each other and bond as a group. This is a very important step, as it teaches children from the mainstream system that SEN children are not so different, that they can hold their hand even though it might be full of dribble or even if they do not speak or look at them. Children with Special Needs learn social skills while moving and singing –which also improves their motor, communication and language skills– and they come closer to children without any disabilities, diminishing rejection. (Friendship circle, 2013); (Gil Bartolomé, 2016, pp. 3, 150).

Studies prove that performing arts in Primary Education schools reduces significantly the number of rejections in the drama group, as well as the negative attributes to other pupils. (Gil Bartolomé, 2016, p. 155).

During my school experience in Krossen, something I found eye-opening was how fully inclusion is not always the best answer. The self-image that every pupil has is on the peak of importance. It is good if a child can assist to mainstream classes and have a similar outcome to his/her schoolmates, but most of the times children with Special Needs get frustrated when they realise that they are not achieving the goals at the same speed, and that only worsens their output. However, “Bailey asserts that what is gained by inclusivity outweighs the prevailing recommendations against mixing disabilities, diagnoses, and ages” (Kidder, 2011, p. 298) besides the fact that it is proven that drama ameliorates self-esteem and self-image (Martin, 2004):

As a disabled American, I have been faced many times with having to prove myself. When I am on stage, it is as if a light has been turned on inside me—a light that shines brilliantly ... A feeling of freedom feels my heart ... It is at that pivotal moment that the feeling takes the form of a voice in my head saying, ‘Let go-you’re free! Free to forget all your problems, all your concerns, all your worries, and for one glimmering moment, be someone else’ (Bailey, 2009, p. 356).

When the self-concept that pupils with Special Needs have is healthy, it becomes easier to interact with them and hence, for other pupils to befriend them.

Individuals who don’t know how to develop friendships and reach out to others become isolated, depressed, passive, or angry. Successful inclusion in the community is difficult if social skills are lacking; non-disabled community members aren’t welcoming or understanding to an individual who is withdrawn, rude, provocative, or hostile. (Bailey, 1997, p. 2)

Another thing that one of the teachers directing the play at Krossen pointed out about the drama class, is how important it is for parents. Throughout my week there I had seen many of the SEN children in different classes, and to see them acting out on stage, dancing, singing and having fun with other children without feeling any less, overwhelmed me. Children from mainstream classes were learning to be considerate about others’ different needs, and that was just as beautiful. So if it was so heart-warming for me, I cannot even imagine how emotional it has to be for a parent. If the parents see their child who struggles in simple things on that stage on his/her own, their perspective might switch and start considering their daughter/son as a capable person. The way that the family sees their child has a great impact in the infant’s development; Pablo Pineda –the first person with Down Syndrome to finish a university degree in Europe– is the living prove of it. In an interview for the Spanish Newspaper *El Mundo*, he said about his family: “they allowed me to be self-sufficient. They taught me, stimulated me and they demanded the maximum of me. They always believed in me and in my possibilities.” (del Barrio, 2015)

CONCLUSIONS

The drama classes in Krossen are a very interesting approach to inclusion, that have multiple benefits for every pupil, regardless the needs. Many studies show that performing arts help develop social, communicative and language skills among others in an individualised way, meaning that every pupil enhances them at their own level and capacities.

This study also reveals many aspects that the theatrical art has that favour inclusion, such as growing self-esteem and self-image, reducing rejection and preventing bullying. This goes hand in hand with developing social skills.

At last, it also reflects on the importance that the family has on the development of a child with Special Needs, and how performing publicly a play can benefit this as well.

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¹⁶⁰ Own translation